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ABSTRACT

An awareness of television's potentially harmful influence on young children's ways of thinking and behaving may lead parents to reconsider their acceptance of television as an inevitable part of their children's lives. Such an awareness may change their focus from what their children are watching to why and how much they are watching, and what they are missing as a result. An understanding of the changes in child rearing brought about by the availability of TV as a sedative for active and troublesome preschoolers, (changes that lead to poorer socialization of children), may cause parents to decide that their difficulties as parents are ultimately increased, not alleviated, as a result of their use of television as a source of relief. Although individuals may be powerless in the face of the abstract machine that modern society has become, they can still assert their wills in the face of that real and tangible machine in their homes, the television. They can learn to control it so that it does not control them. Appended materials list television rules for parents. (RH)

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TV AND ITS AFFECT ON THE FAMILY

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Introduction

Since the introduction of television in the 1940s, it has become a constant companion of all segments of society. The impact television has on our lives is felt by young and old and is of great significance. We ingest it daily as we do food. It is so deeply entrenched in our lives that it cannot be easily eliminated. The ultimate goal would then be to learn to live with television but be in control of the influence it exerts over our lives. The family needs to learn to control television and not permit television to control the family.

In 1938 the following quote by E. B. White appeared in Harper's Magazine. "I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television--of that I am quite sure."

White's words have become prophetic. Television has had and is having an immeasurable impact on our lives. The A.C. Nielsen Company reports the average television set ran for four hours and thirty-five minutes each day in 1950; by 1984, the daily total had risen to seven hours, two minutes. It appears that Americans spend more time watching television than doing any other single activity other than sleeping (Trelease, 1985). By the time a teenager graduates from high school, 15,000 hours will have been spent before the TV screen (Waters, 1977).

Sesame Street Impact

In 1969 two significant events took place; Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, and Sesame Street went on the air. Each arose from closely connected points of origin, and both were the culmination of enormously expensive national efforts. Although the costs of the space program dwarfed those of educational television, the relatively huge investments involved in each effort reflected America's reaction to the threat of Sputnik I and to the challenge of new technology.

Some of the most thorough and complete TV research was conducted in connection with Sesame Street. In the beginning, many parents believed that young children would profit as much from

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giving their attention to a television program as they might if they spent that time talking and listening to a real person in real life. With almost universal acceptance of Sesame Street as a positive educational experience for preschool children, many parents have come to feel that watching "educational" television programs may be a more profitable mental occupation than any they themselves might provide.

Yet the educational results of Sesame Street have been disappointing. The expectation that a program--carefully designed by the most eminent and knowledgeable child specialists--would bridge the gap between middle-class children who have had ample verbal opportunities at home and those children deprived of such opportunities has not been realized. Although children do exhibit certain small gains in number and letter recognition as a result of viewing Sesame Street, their language skills do not show any significant or permanent gains as they progress through school (Dorr, 1980).

Of interest to parents should be the segment of children who did make signficant gains when they viewed Sesame Street. These children had parents who interacted with them concerning the material they viewed on television. The implications become obvious. It is not the viewing itself that promotes learning, but what is done with the material viewed in an oral context (Dorr, 1980). It was determined that the program that was designed to narrow the gap between advantaged and disadvanged children might have actually widened the gap when used with parent involvement (Murray, 1980).

TV Viewing and Academic Performance

It appears that the longer a child watches TV the longer they tend to watch (Anderson, et. al., 1980). Much research has been done to determine just what factors illicite holding power over children's attention. These factors, movement, peculiar voices, alliteration, etc., have been incorporated into television's format to insure that children are watching. Television tends to develop attention inertia.

With children watching such large amounts of TV, what impact does it have on their learning potential? Does viewing TV have a positive affect on the development of children's cognitive skills, learning capacity or fund of general knowledge? Early studies reported that the heavy TV viewer tended to be less bright than the lighter viewers. However, it was not determined whether TV was the cause of poor academic performance or whether less bright children were simply more likely to find comfort in TV viewing than did their more gifted peers. More current studies have begun to suggest that

TV viewing may be a possible cause of disturbed learning potential (Murray, 1980).

A Canadian longitudinal study found that when TV was introduced into a TV-free town the reading skills of the school age children deterioriated to the level of their peers in towns with a long history of TV. The children's verbal fluency also decreased (Murray, 1980).

In a study conducted on New York middle-class families there was found to be evidence indicating that viewing patterns affected academic performance, Students who watched in excess of 17 hours per week had a time-lag correlation in their academic performance. Eighteen months after the initial assessment these students' academic performance decreased while students viewing less TV experienced no significant change in their academic performance (Gadberry, 1977).

In 1980 a new question was on the California scholastic achievement test. It appeared to have very little to do with the students' classwork, but in reality had very much to do with it. The question was: "How much time do you spend watching TV each day?" Over half a million children responded. The results of this question were correlated with the student's performance on the test. The findings showed that the more time the student watched TV, the lower the achievement score; the less time, the higher the score. These correlations proved true regardless of the child's IQ, social background, or study practices (Trelease, 1985).

Television Viewing and Reading

1. It is recognized by parents and educators alike that reading is an essential skill for student success in school. Is there a relationship between TV viewing and reading? There is a scarcity of research on the impact TV viewing has on a child's ability to read and actual reading habits. However, there are some noteable contradictions between the act of reading and the act of viewing TV which can impede the development of adequate reading habits.

Television viewing is the direct opposite of reading. TV encourages short segments of attention while reading requires and encourages longer attention spans. Television moves at a rapid pace to keep the attention focused between commercials allowing no time to ponder or review an especially delightful passage. Nor or TV watchers required to develop their own images. Everything is spelled out in graphic detail on the screen. Everything except the act of thinking. This cannot be portrayed on TV.

It is known that children with good oral language skills develop into more proficient readers than children with a lack of

oral language opportunities. Yet excessive TV viewing tends to deprive children of these opportunities.

Because schools function on the premise that the bulk of learning takes place through reading, reading skills become a critical component in student overall academic achievement. Learning how to read and then using these skills is what school is all about.

Television and Other Activities

The content of TV has not been mentioned, but it should be noted that there is more and more current research indicating the potential harms to the very young viewer. Children are being treated at adults. No longer need they wait until they can read to experience many events, rather they are conveyed to them in living color in their own living room through television. But exposure and understanding are two different areas. Elkind calls this "pseudosophistication." Children can talk a great deal about what they do not understand (Elkind, 1980).

2. Childhood is a time when the primary focus for the child is learning about life, and children do this primarily through forms of play and social interaction. What activites in a child's life is television replacing? During this 15,000 hours of viewing what is the child missing? He is not working in the garage with his father, or in the garden with his mother. He is not doing homework, or collecting stamps, or reading. He is not cleaning his room, helping with supper, or cutting the lawn. He is not listening to a discussion about community politics among his parents or painting pictures. He is not involved in playing. Is what he gains from television viewing worth that from which he is deprived (England, 1984)?

Developing a Viewing Awareness

It is evident that the amount of TV viewing in a family needs to be controlled. But how to start is the stumbling block. Much of what can be done will be determined by the age of the children in the family and the determination of the parents. Bringing about change is never easy and to change something that has become such a part of our social climate requires determination and perseverance.

The first step is to develop an awareness based on actual information as to just how much viewing is being done by the various members of the family to include the parents. This can be done by constructing a chart with each family member's name and a place to log the programs viewed and the amount of time involved. Chart for one week to get an accurate appraisal of the TV situation.

After the data has been collected it is time to make some decisions based on information. How much time is it acceptable for the various members to view TV. There are options. These are: (1) Complete TV Off--the set is either disconnected; turned to the wall; or covered (2) Temporary TV Off--a designated period of not TV is preestablished, ranging from one week to several months (3) Partial TV Off--by family consensus the set is turned on for short periods only, either for one or two daily programs or for specials (4) Individual's TV Off--the mount of TV viewed is decided on an individual basis (DeFranco, 1980).

Some points to consider are that to totally remove TV from the activities of the family may be extremely difficult. This decision would take a great deal of courage, but the results would be worth the effort. Remember than an excess of ten hours of TV viewing per week has a deleterious affect on children. One hour per night could be adequate on a school night, but could be altered for the weekend. This would keep the total viewing well below the ten hour maximum. However, these decisions must be made for each individual family based on the data collected and the desired goals of the family. A rule of thumb for children based on their developmental patterns suggests no TV for children under six, one hour per day for children seven to eleven, with a flexible weekend rule (Moody, 1980).

The third step is to develop some activities that will replace the "spare" time that children will experience. If TV viewing is going to be curtailed, something must take its place and that something will have to be planned by the parents initally. Some examples are (1) ferret out seldom-used toys, books records, etc. (2) have something new like a large jigsaw puzzle. (3) arrange a children's corner in the kitchen so they can be close to mothers (4) involve children in family activities such as laundry, cleaning, plant care, (5) plan family outing to zoo, library, etc.

It is important than the rules be maintained (See Appendix A for possible rules.) It will be difficult and parents must be prepared for withdrawal pains. Constantly praise whatever successful efforts are evident. Show your admiration for progress no matter how small.

Many adults are hooked on TV (Winn, 1978). Two factors combine to "hook" parents on using TV: its unique ability to pacify children and its ready availability. When a parent is faced with annoying behavior on the part of a child, the temptation to resort to television is strong, far stronger than if it were not so handy, easy to use, and swiftly effective. This attitude must be changed if there is to be any hope for the children.

Exercising Selectivity

If the children are watching limited amounts of TV it is critical that they learn how to be selective in their viewing. Children need to be taught (if necessary) how to read the TV guide in the newspaper and plan for their viewing time. It is critical that they turn the set off when their selected show concludes. Teaching this attitude to children is well worth all the effort involved in controlling TV. Children need to realize the options that are available for their viewing time and select wisely.

Parents need to be involved in the children's selections and viewing. Discussion can springboard from what the children are seeing and misperceptions, stereotyping, and incongruous behavior can be corrected. Television does not reflect the real world, but children fail to recognize this fact.

Summary

An awareness of television's potentially pathogenic influence on young children's ways of thinking and behaving may lead parents to reconsider their acceptance of television as an inevitable part of their children's lives. It may change their focus from what their children are watching to why and how much they are watching, and what they are missing as a result. An understanding of the changes in child rearing brought about by the availability of TV as a sedative for active and troublesome preschoolers, changes that lead to poorer socialization of children, may cause parents to decide that their difficulties as parents are ultimately increased, not alleviated, as a result of their use of television as a source of relief.

Although we may be powerless in the face of the abstract machine that modern society has become, we can still assert our wills in the face of that real and tangible machine in our home, the television. We can learn to control it so that it does not control us.

Appendix A

SOME TELEVISION RULES FOR PARENTS

1. Make certain children always have a good and specific reason for viewing what they are viewing. If they have no good idea, or no idea at all, turn the set off.

2. Insist that children watch only one program at a sitting. Very rarely are two shows worth viewing back to back. Eliminate continuous viewing.

3. Limit spontaneous viewing and plan viewing for the family in advance. Without schedules, it is very hard to keep track of what and of how much we watch.

4. Have one parent share at least half of a child's viewing time. This rule alone could revolutionalize the use of TV in American homes.

5. Look for at least one good program a week to turn into an expanded experience for children--a trip to the library, a question for a teacher, something to write about, or just a good talk.

6. Monitor the viewing of children. Parents who do are invariably surprised at what they find. Many then act.

7. Do not use TV as a punishment or a reward. Most children value TV too much already. Why increase its value or their desire for it?

8. Be a good model. Monitor your own viewing. Justify, if only for yourself, the TV choices you make in a week.

9. Encourage TV education in your schools. Changes are very good that there is little attention paid to TV in your child's school.

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